

LIBERIA: NATIONAL SECURITY INTERESTS IN TRANSFORMATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

BY

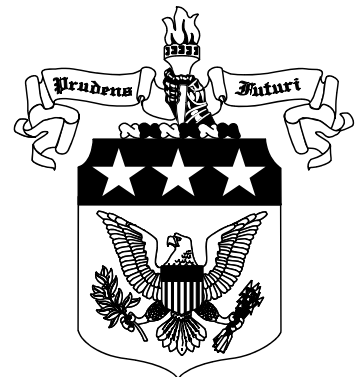
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USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

**LIBERIA: NATIONAL SECURITY INTERESTS IN TRANSFORMATIONAL
DEVELOPMENT**

by

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ABSTRACT

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Liberia is of national security interest to the United States of America (US). The 14-year civil war, ending in 2003, left the country devastated with collapsed government, economic, physical and social infrastructure. To continue strengthening democratic government and development trajectory, Liberian youth must be integrated as full citizens before they become disenfranchised and form groups of insurgents that can threaten national and international security. This paper explores why Liberia is of national security interest to the US, elements of adolescent personal development that were missed because the nation was in conflict, and what youth need to become contributing members of a democratic nation. The author advocates skills training as a way for youth to complete their personal development, gain skills in functioning within a democracy, and acquire skills needed for economic empowerment. As development reinforces defense and diplomacy as elements of national security, the needs of youth ex-combatants must be addressed in US international development assistance programs.

LIBERIA: NATIONAL SECURITY INTERESTS IN TRANSFORMATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Republic of Liberia, a West African country bordered by the Atlantic Ocean, Guinea, Sierra Leone and Côte d'Ivoire, is a country in transition. Liberia experienced a 14-year civil war that witnessed the collapse of the government, economic, physical and social infrastructure. It also threatened the social order and development trajectory. As a result of the civil war, which ended in 2003, Liberia has experienced a demographic transition yielding a youth bulge and a rapid rate of urban population growth. When demographic factors impact non-demographic factors, such as unresponsive governance, ineffective institutions, and post-conflict tensions, the functional capacity of a state continues to be challenged. Youth must be integrated as full citizens before they become disenfranchised and form strong groups of insurgents that can threaten the stability of the country and region. If the United States of America (US) has security interests in Liberia and if Liberian stability is a national security objective, then the US must address the needs of youth to help facilitate Liberian transformation into a more stable state and member of the Mano River Union. This paper rests on the presumption that a stable Liberia is a strategic interest of the US. Therefore, the US must do what it can to promote a successful transformation of post-conflict Liberia.

Given that presumption, the thesis of this Strategic Research Project is that a primary focus of a Liberian transformation effort must be to integrate former civil war combatants into the formal economy, and that the youth component of the integration challenge should be a specific emphasis of the American assistance effort in order to achieve strategic success in the Mano River basin.

US National Security Interests

The 2006 National Security Strategy (NSS 2006) of the United States of America included and reflected American values and national interests, and the strategy provides an outline for US engagement in the world. Encompassing the use of diplomatic, information, military, economic, financial, intelligence and law enforcement elements of national power, NSS 2006 acknowledged the worldwide dangers posed by failed states. It further elaborated on how American security interests can be threatened by regional conflicts because of the propensity of conflict to devolve into humanitarian tragedy.¹ One of the principles of the security strategy was that “states that are governed well are most inclined to behave well.”²

President George W. Bush responded to the September 11, 2001 attacks on America in the 2002 National Security Strategy (NSS 2002) by recognizing weak and failed states as the central threat to global security emanating from the developing world. Specifically, NSS 2002 stated: “America is now threatened less by conquering states than we are by failing ones.”³ NSS 2006 went further and declared that “helping the world’s poor is a strategic priority and moral imperative.”⁴ This philosophy is reflected in the American development assistance program that concentrates on agriculture, democracy and governance, economic growth, environment, education, health, and humanitarian assistance in approximately one hundred countries worldwide to assist in providing a better future. Development assistance reinforces and strengthens the various instruments of national power as it helps build stable, accountable national institutions that can meet the needs of citizens and enable states to take part in the international community. This ultimately reduces sustained threats to American national security.

NSS 2006 addressed the geo-strategic importance of the African continent, and made a commitment to strengthen domestic and regional capacities to support post-conflict transformations. Africa, the second largest continent, encompasses 25 percent of the world's landmass and 20 percent of its coastline. The NSS goal for Africa was for the continent, which accounts for more than one quarter of the nations in the world, to know "liberty, peace, stability, and increasing prosperity."⁵ The NSS 2006 strategy for Africa is to "promote economic development and the expansion of effective, democratic governance so that African states can take the lead in addressing African challenges."⁶

The U. S. Department of State and U. S. Agency for International Development (USAID) published a joint Strategic Plan 2007-2012 which supported the NSS and delineated how foreign policy and development assistance were to be administered and implemented. Overall, the mission was to "Advance freedom for the benefit of the American people and the international community by helping to build and sustain a more democratic, secure, and prosperous world composed of well-governed states that respond to the needs of their people, reduce widespread poverty, and act responsibly within the international system."⁷ The strategic goals are achieving peace and security, governing justly and democratically, investing in people, promoting economic growth and prosperity, providing humanitarian assistance, promoting international understanding, and strengthening consular and management capabilities.⁸

The Strategic Plan acknowledges that Sub-Saharan Africa is the poorest region in the world, and that the US is committed to helping people improve their own lives in addition to making the world safer and better. Africa is "one of the last emerging markets that will soon supply 25 percent of U. S. oil imports."⁹ Africa is seen as a

continent of promise and opportunity, and is heavily endowed with extensive natural resources that can serve as a base for greater economic growth.

In spite of being rich in natural resources, Africa also has great difficulties. Youth present a particular challenge as approximately 50 percent of the African population is under 15 years of age, and the population is expected to grow from 800 million to two billion by 2050. The youth population is perceived to be vulnerable to radicalism, anti-Americanism, and criminal organizations.¹⁰ Senior Department of Defense and Department of State officials recognize that the continent's porous country borders, emerging security forces, and lawlessness could provide a sanctuary for terrorists.¹¹

Using NSS 2006 as a framework, it becomes apparent that the US has strategic interests in Africa. In keeping with the NSS 2006, development programs consolidate democratic transitions; bolster fragile states; strengthen regional and sub-regional organizations; reinforce regional security capacity; intensify Africa counterterrorism cooperation and capacity; stimulate Africa's economic development and growth; and focus on humanitarian assistance.

NSS 2006 and the Strategic Plan both support the importance of Liberia. After 14 years of civil war in Liberia, the US demonstrated its commitment and "led international efforts to restore peace and bolster stability after vicious internal conflict".¹² Liberia is a regional priority with the American government rendering development support in the areas of humanitarian assistance, democracy and governance, and economic growth.¹³ In each of these areas, particular attention must be paid to youth if they are to be full participants in the society. Knowing the youth were involved in the civil war, their

socialization process has promoted neither an understanding nor an appreciation of democracy.

The US has a special historical relationship with Liberia. Founded by the American Colonization Society, Liberia means “liberty” and was established in 1847 as a settlement of freed American slaves in Africa. Americo-Liberians established a republic with a dual system of statutory law based on the American judicial law. Monrovia, the capital, was named in honor of President James Monroe. Liberia served as the Central Intelligence Agency’s main listening post in Africa during the Cold War.¹⁴ In 2003, the US committed to the demobilization and rebuilding of Liberia’s army through the Comprehensive Peace Accord. Reform of the security sector, including military, police, immigration, customs and the President’s security service, is critical to the establishment and maintenance of peace and security. When President Bush visited Liberia in February 2008, the first US leader to do so since 1978, he pledged continued support in training the Liberian army “to be a source of security instead of a source of terror.”¹⁵ Liberia is the only country in Africa that has offered to host the U. S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), a military headquarters that will be charged with helping to stabilize Africa.

Liberia as a Fragile State

Liberia, plagued by chronic instability, has played a key role in West Africa and the Middle East. With the exception of the two-year period from 1997 to 1999, Liberia was ravaged by armed conflict from 1989 to 2003 and was rendered one of the poorest countries in the world. It became a failed state in a fragile region. The failure of the country was linked to two major causes: political and social exclusion and competition

over resources. Decades of destabilization and the inability of the central government to provide basic services and security resulted in Liberia playing a central role in the perpetuation of armed conflict in the Mano River Union (MRU)¹⁶ as violent conflict spread across chronically fluid borders and engulfed the region in catastrophic humanitarian crisis.

MRU began in 1973 as an economic union between Liberia and Sierra Leone to eliminate barriers to mutual trade, and to secure a fair distribution of the benefits of economic cooperation. It was named for the [Mano River](#) which begins in the Guinea highlands and forms a border between Liberia and Sierra Leone. Sharing a common border and cultural, political and ethnic similarities, the two countries were also bound by their natural resources: diamonds, iron ore, bauxite, forests, fishing, and hydro-electric potential. Cocoa, coffee, rubber and oil palm were the main agricultural cash crops. Economic cooperation was designed to increase the reach and size of internal markets.¹⁷

Before 1989, the same political, social and economic conditions that existed in Liberia also characterized Guinea (which joined the MRU in 1980) and Sierra Leone: widespread poverty, unemployment, and illiteracy; government control by a few based on party affiliation and intolerance of opposition; ethnic and family loyalty. Citizens had neither the right to choose their government through free and fair elections nor the right to hold the government accountable for their protection and welfare. The conditions in the neighboring countries facilitated the spread of the Liberian conflict. The impact of the Liberian civil war was regional: more human lives were lost in Sierra Leone than in Liberia; major cities in Guinea were destroyed; and the stability of the entire MRU was

threatened. Basic infrastructure within the Mano River Basin was crippled and development stagnated. Liberia became and remains a regional influence.

Each government within the MRU existed without citizen support from the majority. This made the governments illegitimate and vulnerable, and dependent upon the strength of the military for survival. Civil society groups were focused on their own issues without acknowledging that challenges were embedded in the process of governance. Governments politicized civil society groups, making them instruments of national support for the abuse of human rights. This, in turn, led civil society groups to be involved in violent activities to attain political objectives.

Liberia signed the Comprehensive Peace Accord in 2003, setting the stage for a transitional government. This move to peace was recognized throughout the world and the United Nations Security Council established the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) to improve security and to create an environment for 2005 democratic elections. Twenty-two candidates ran for president, with a run-off election held between Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, a Harvard University educated economist and member of the Unity Party, and George Weah, a soccer millionaire and member of the Congress for Democratic Change. Receiving a 60 percent majority of the vote, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was seated as President and Head of State in January 2006.

The challenges for Liberia did not end with a democratically-elected government assuming office. As a result of prolonged armed conflict, approximately 250,000 people were killed in a country with a population of approximately three million. Over one million citizens were internally displaced, and approximately 242,000 were forced to flee to neighboring countries of Guinea, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana.¹⁸ Deaths

and the flow of refugees and internally displaced people altered the size, age structure, and ethnic population mix for Liberia immediately as well as for years yet to come. As of July 2007, Liberia had 43.6% of its population in the 0 to 14 year age bracket; 53.6% in the 15-64 year range; and 2.6% 65 years and older with the median age of 18.1 years.¹⁹ This population youth bulge, defined as young adults ages 15 to 29 accounting for more than 40% of all adults aged 15 years and above, is expected to result in Liberia being one of the few countries having a median age of less than 22 years by 2050.²⁰

The fragility of the three states of the MRU compromises efforts to establish peace and stability in the West Africa region. Exploitation of rich natural resources (diamonds, gold, iron ore, timber and tropical rainforests) helped finance MRU's turbulent history. The fifteen states comprising the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) are also characterized by weak, failed and recovering governance.²¹ As fighting and instability persist in West Africa, so does the growth of terrorist networks and international criminal organizations; spread of disease; environmental degradation; increased poverty; clashes and ethnic strife; fragmentation of society; and deterioration of regional living conditions.

Former Liberian President Charles Taylor, protégé of and trained by Libyan dictator Colonel Mu'ammar al-Qadhafi as a guerilla fighter in the 1980s²², had regional aspirations and promoted cross-border movement of foreign fighters throughout Africa, especially the MRU. Taylor had Libyan support in fueling regional instability.²³ It has been reported that the Al-Qaeda network purchased millions of dollars worth of diamonds from the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebels through Liberia,²⁴ and that Osama bin Laden's network was supporting the rough diamond trade of Sierra Leone

through RUF when the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania were bombed in 1998.²⁵ Former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Peter Brooks maintained that in 2000 and 2001, al Qaeda moved as “much as \$20 million into commodities” to circumvent the international effort to freeze Al-Qaeda assets, and that Taylor harbored terrorists from Al-Qaeda and Hezbollah.²⁶

Liberia became more important strategically to the US after the attacks on American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania and the September 2001 direct attacks on America. Integral to achieving peace and security in the West African region, and of particular concern to American security interests, is ensuring that the fragility of Liberia does not destabilize other states. The West Africa Region has had recent conflicts in Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, and Sierra Leone. Weak states unable to eliminate terrorist and non-state organizations can be unduly influenced directly and regionally by the dynamics of civil war in neighboring countries.

Marginalized Liberian youth who served as combatants during wartime and have been recruited in Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire, could assist in fighting in other ECOWAS countries having armed and lower-intensity conflicts. The Liberian civil war, then, was a defining event in Liberia's development as well as for the countries in the MRU. In fact, President Sirleaf “called on Liberians to desist from supporting any group in the ongoing political crisis in Guinea” in 2007 when mercenaries were being recruited by “former executives of some of the country's disbanded warring factions.”²⁷

Liberian Civil War

The commencement of the Liberian civil war is conventionally traced to Nimba County where cross-border infiltration from Côte d'Ivoire by the National Patriotic Front

of Liberia (NPFL), the party for which Charles Taylor became spokesman in December 1989, was contested by various ethnic militia and government forces. Regional involvement ensued with Nigeria sending peace keeping forces to repel Ivorian and French influence. The period from 1989-1996 has become known as one of the bloodiest and worst episodes of ethnic cleansing. War claimed the lives of one of every 17 people in the country, displaced most of the survivors, and shattered what had once been a viable economic infrastructure. Conflict contributed to retarding the democratization that had begun to flourish throughout West Africa in the 1990s and destabilized a region that was already one of the most fragile in the world.

The United Nations Security Council sanctioned Taylor for destabilizing neighbors when Guinean and Ivorian-supported militia gained ground in the northwest and southeast areas of Liberia. A United Nations Observer Mission in Liberia (UNOMIL) was deployed in 1994, but the humanitarian crisis worsened. When it was deemed that Americans and other foreigners were no longer safe in Liberia in 1996, U. S. Joint Task Force Operation Assured Response evacuated 2,444 people.²⁸ Armed Liberians subsequently broke into the grounds of the American Embassy and were met by a gunfire exchange with US special forces. President William J. Clinton ordered “the amphibious assault ship USS Guam and the destroyer USS Connolly, accompanied by three support ships, to leave the Adriatic Sea and steam toward the coast of West Africa.”²⁹

The UNOMIL mission ended in 1997 and fighting intensified. Elections held in 1997 resulted in Taylor being elected President with 75.33 percent of the vote and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf a distant second with 9.58 percent.³⁰ Taylor formed the National

Patriotic Party and leaders who had been forced to leave the country formed the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) Party whose aim was to destabilize the government and gain control of the local diamond fields. Taylor supported Sierra Leonean rebels, drawing American and British antagonism. Although the elections were declared “free and fair” by international monitors, Liberians were afraid that more violence would ensue if Taylor had not won.

Britain, Ghana, Nigeria and the US accused Liberia of arming insurgents in Sierra Leone in exchange for diamonds. The American Embassy temporarily closed after being fired upon when warlord Roosevelt Johnson, pursued by Taylor, sought refuge. The UN imposed sanctions on Liberian diamonds and banned travel for government officials. Taylor was indicted by a U.N.-backed court for war crimes, crimes against humanity, and violations of international humanitarian law during Sierra Leone’s civil war.

Congressman Frank Wolf testified before the House Armed Services Committee on June 13, 2002 on the implications that Liberia had “for our national security interest in light of Mr. Taylor’s relationship with international arms dealers and even terrorist networks, including al Qaeda.”³¹ President Bush called for Taylor to step down, which he subsequently did amidst the arrival of US Marines and Nigerian peacekeepers. American troops left Liberia in 2003 just ahead of the arrival of the UNMIL, a multi-dimensional operation including political military, police, criminal justice, civil affairs, human rights, gender, child protection, disarmament, demobilization, reintegration, and public information components. The focus of the campaign, which still exists, was to disarm foreign combatants and enforce the cease-fire.³² UNMIL was also to coordinate

with ECOWAS, Africa Union, United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone, United Nations Mission in Côte d'Ivoire, and the United Nations Office in West Africa.

Youth Participation in Civil War

But how was armed conflict perpetuated for such a long period in Liberia? The regional context of the Liberian Civil War was defined by a history of youth mobilization for community defense and a population of willing young recruits who, lacking social opportunities and jobs and feeling socially excluded, saw fighting as a way to earn a living and to make a life. It is often said that there would be no war without youth, as combatant forces are comprised mainly of young people who are agile, energetic, and impressionable. Given the history of Liberia, many of the youth recruited for fighting had only known a life of war.³³ They were personally unfamiliar with peaceful society and had limited, if any, exposure to the three major peacetime institutions societies depend on to socialize children: family, church and school. Although these institutions existed in modified terms, they were either dedicated to self-preservation or unable to reach out to citizens as in peaceful times. Conflict led to life conditions causing adolescents and youth to assume adult roles as parents, breadwinners, caretakers and/or fighters.

In addition to being defined chronologically, “youth” must also be considered functionally to include the process of transitioning from childhood to adulthood, and culturally to include the social context in which one must function. Fighting youth were at developmental stages of life that made them vulnerable to the power of their commanders who could present recruitment as a rite of passage to adulthood. Being an adult meant demonstrating the capacity to contribute economically to the welfare of the family. Youth rarely look for a war, but war presents “an opportunity for employment, to

escape from an oppressive family situation or humiliation at school, for adventure, or to serve a cause.”³⁴

Insurgents, skilled in navigating and at surviving in the dense forests and river beds that separated countries, could easily recruit youth (including females) to join the fighting forces. Youth were recruited to fight in areas in which they had limited ties and social contacts, thereby increasing their loyalty to the leaders who provided food and pay. Youth could be promised high wages if they became combatants, wages that were seldom paid at promised levels. Confronting a number of factors, such as poverty, abuse, urban migration, and family breakdown, life as a combatant often seemed to adolescent logic to offer more opportunities than life at home. Consequently, youth were drawn by the increased economic incentives, opportunities to establish stature and earn peer respect, and the independence combat afforded.³⁵

If their commander was killed, combatants were vulnerable to re-recruitment by others or because the only alternative was laboring for starvation wages. Borders between countries were open wilderness, defined by rivers, and largely undefended. This fostered a “floating population” of experienced combatants to move from conflict to conflict, to form alliances, and to earn respect. These conditions further resulted in a population of unstable and unemployed youth who were able to wield power and ignite fear. Opportunities for recruitment into fighting factions or criminal networks were attractive in the absence of viable alternatives.

There is also a gender consideration for youth, a time at which societal expectations transition from carefree adolescence to more responsible adulthood. The world expands for males as they are encouraged to prove their manhood, be visible,

and take risks. Alternatively, the world contracts for females as they experience greater restrictions and are sheltered from much of society starting at the stage of puberty. Social interaction is restricted, enrollment in school declines, and girls are often relegated to the domestic sphere for such reasons as marriage, purity, and family reputation. This lack of power impacts decision making and assertiveness skills. Ultimately, this lack of power can often lead to a limited ability to care for oneself and negotiate what is in one's best interest.

A portion of Liberian fighters were females, and the context within which they joined armed forces is crucial to understanding recruitment. The concepts of "voluntary" and "forced" recruitment incorrectly assume that viable alternatives existed and that there was human security in Liberia. Females usually comprised 10 to 30 percent of armed forces at any one time and tended to be younger than their male counterparts.³⁶ In Liberia, females cited "feminist" motives for enlisting in armed services. They wanted to protect themselves and other women from physical violence (particularly sexual) and wanted to be in position to retaliate against such violence. The conflict situation meant that many young males had weapons in their possession and they were able to exercise power to commit rapes. This played a significant part in the decision by females to become combatants and explains their immediate and long-term dependence on commanders for protection.³⁷ Female soldiers were seen as being as effective as their male colleagues and were feared by many. Some females also reported joining fighting forces for economic reasons, based on poverty or a desire to obtain luxury items such as make up and red shoes.³⁸

Population Action International has done extensive research on the youth population bulge and its impact on peace. They have found that youth bulges are often volatile because there are too many males trying simultaneously to secure employment, earn respect from peers and elders, achieve identity, assert their independence and impress females.³⁹ Where half or more of the population is ages 15 to 29 years, there is an extreme youth bulge with one of the most dangerous natural resources: idle young men.⁴⁰ The political volatility of men is increased by the political and social exclusion of women who are “relatively averse to the use of force to resolve civil and interstate disputes.”⁴¹

Young people in Liberia were mobilized into war by others, fought for their own causes, and sought to change the circumstances of their own grievances, especially poverty. Youth reacted to the causes of state fragility as they affected their lives: political and social exclusion and competition over resources. Young people became the casualties of economic crises. Economic reforms mandated cuts in public expenditures and nations were no longer able to maintain what youth felt they were entitled to receive. Excluded from power, work, education, and leisure, youth found ways to show how they could make a difference as victims or agents of change. Speaking of young fighters, a Liberian Chief stated: “They are the worst people in the world, and they are our children.”⁴²

Youth who grew up in a nation in civil conflict had a socialization process that did not teach them traditions, *morés* and customs. They lacked socialization in the value of self-respect and respect for others. Immersed in street life, they were the victims and by-products of poor health and nutrition, poverty, negative self-images, hatred, and low

expectations. The normalcy of the social system was disrupted, and the government was not able to provide access to basic services. Families disintegrated and relationships grounded in trust and kinship all but disappeared. Youth experienced a life of social survival networks that were established so that group members could look after one another. They lived in settings in which death was constant, weapons were accessible, and leaders profited from the spoils of war. Youth were left to use their collective knowledge, ignorance, or guidance provided by warlords and other predators for survival.

As Liberia experienced more violence, the socioeconomic indicators worsened. For youth this was manifested in “school dropout and related rising illiteracy rates, lack of life and social skills, massive unemployment, and growing illegal substance use/abuse or addictions of various kinds.”⁴³ Hope for upward mobility was dashed. Youth who were illiterate and innumerate held limited potential to digest, understand and analyze information. This author spent time in Liberia prior to the national election, and was struck by the number of youth who approached her with a cell phone asking whether she was literate and requesting that a text message be read aloud.⁴⁴ Technology preceded literacy.

Ex-combatants and youth who lived through the civil conflict suffered from environmental stressors brought on by the war. Some witnessed their families killed or tortured, while others were the perpetrators or victims of violence. Sufficient appropriate counseling was not readily available to help ex-combatants, refugees or internally displaced persons understand the concept of war and to build coping mechanisms.

Youth Development

Most combatants are recruited during the time of their childhood or adolescence, two very important stages of development that help define who the child will become. For the purposes of this paper, focus is on adolescence, a time in life when values are cemented and long-range commitments are formulated. Friendships become a measure of self-worth and the basis for personal behavior. The outcomes of the decisions that adolescents make will not only shape their own future, but will have a significant impact on the society and on the world that these young people will inherit.

Only the years of birth to age three, when the infant learns to walk, speak, and respond, rival adolescence for the rapidity and intensity of development and change. Adolescence is a period in which two major growth processes occur. First, adolescents are in a quest to meet their basic personal and social needs to be safe, cared for, valued, useful and spiritually grounded. Second, they build skills and competencies that allow them to function and contribute in their daily lives. While major human development theorists differ on the order in which such growth occurs, they agree on the importance of family and community during adolescence.⁴⁵ Adolescence is a period of biological, cognitive, and socio-emotional changes.

Adolescents develop advanced reasoning skills which enable them to think about multiple options and possibilities, and make choices. Their logical thought processes also allow them to think hypothetically. They develop abstract thinking skills which allow them to make judgments about things they cannot see, hear or touch. This is manifested in their concepts of faith, trust, beliefs, and spirituality. Finally, they develop meta-cognition which allows adolescents to think about how they feel, what they are thinking, and how they are perceived by others.

The needs of adolescents can be broken into eight major categories: support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, constructive use of time, commitment to a goal, reinforcement of values, social acceptance, and positive identity. When living in a failed state with the community and family not able to provide for these needs, adolescents are easily attracted by the warlord who can take advantage of their needy and impressionable stage of development.

Lawrence Kohlberg advanced the theory that moral development and moral reasoning unfold in a series of stages. Adolescents value trust, caring and loyalty as bases for moral judgments and seek similar feedback as does a child in wanting those in authority to reinforce that they are a “good girl” or “good boy.” Interestingly, Liberians initially called ex-combatants “bad boys” or “bad girls” to indicate they had been actively involved in the civil conflict. Kohlberg’s next stage of moral development, social systems morality, asserted that moral judgments were based on understanding the social order, law, justice, and duty. At the social contract and individual rights stages of development, individuals reason that values, rights, and principles transcend the law. The individual finally forms universal ethical principles and, when faced with a conflict between law and conscience, will follow his or her conscience even though doing so may involve personal risk.⁴⁶

When a person is a combatant during adolescence in an environment of social instability, his or her own socialization process includes aggression as a normal way to act to gain or influence others to give you what you want. This “normal” behavior impacts adult decision making. Given their socialization process, it is unlikely that ex-combatants will suddenly fall into line and advocate governance when a civil or regional

conflict ends. They must have a stake in society and a way to fulfill their personal and societal needs that were once met by the warlord: being valued, earning a living, and having ways to care for themselves and their families. Addressing the needs of young people gives them roots, but nurturing the dreams of young people gives them a vision and purpose that carry them into the future.

Understanding how adolescents develop is critical to understanding Liberia and the MRU. The civil war was carried out primarily through youth combatants. The governments were not functioning, and basic institutions did not exist. Youth learned how to survive largely on their own, with survival being their main focus. Liberia experienced political, financial, cultural and social strain. At the end of the war, these same combatants were expected to become contributing members of society without having the requisite examples or skills to do so.

With a new government in place, the political entity paved the way for Liberia to develop. With the majority of the population in the category of youth, they must participate in formulating strategies and policies that they are expected to observe. Youth must have ways to be fully vested in their country if they are to be citizens exhibiting a culture of discipline, accountability, responsibility, and transparency. Youth have to complete their development as individuals that they missed before they were recruited or voluntarily joined the conflict.

US Assistance

As stated in NSS 2006, USAID's work in development joins diplomacy and defense as one of three key pieces of the nation's foreign policy apparatus. Through USAID, assistance is rendered to Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Côte d'Ivoire. In

spite of the countries having political, social and economic ties, and the US having a stated national security interest in the region, the development assistance programs are quite different.⁴⁷ As fragile states, they are bound by the Mano River basin and their governments have not been successful in ensuring security, meeting the basic needs of citizens and maintaining legitimacy. Each of the countries also has youth who are ex-combatants.

There are three categories of foreign assistance: humanitarian, developmental, and security. US assistance programs must work together to address the needs of youth. If it is in the national security interest of the US to help ex-combatants become productive members of democratic nations, then the US needs to put more emphasis on addressing the ways in which such a transition can be facilitated. In the Mano River Basin, countries must be supported to integrate youth.

International development is multifaceted and complex. Many youth became combatants for reasons of poverty, yet as ex-combatants they can be confronted again by the same poverty when they return to their communities and find that the situation looks worse than it did when they left. As ex-combatants, youth are no longer rendering their state vulnerable, yet their personal vulnerability continues. Youth are the best recipients of aid not only because of their receptiveness to new ideas, but because they have the potential to impact the generation of their parents as well as their children. As youth assist in community development programs, their exponential power to positively impact social development can enhance the results of donor-funded programs.⁴⁸

The future of ex-combatants cannot be left to their own devices or to the predators that have shown that they do not hold the best interest of youth. If at least

one-quarter of the Liberian population was involved in fighting, they cannot embrace becoming contributing, law abiding citizens if they do not have the skills, socialization or reference points to facilitate such a change in behavior. Youth, having their physical, emotional, educational and economic well-being hang in the balance, can serve as a uniting force or as flashpoints for disruption.

Liberia is on a road to pluralistic democracy and citizen involvement is needed. Youth must build equity in their own lives through productive participation in society, confidence in what they can offer, and a future that embraces their dreams. They have to be motivated, mentored, and taught so that they are able to lead productive lives. Youth who experienced life as combatants will become the parents, mentors, socializers and role models for the next generation. They can also become the spoilers and disrupters of peace and security.

Development assistance programs must integrate youth so that they have a stake in their country and do not become spoilers. The youth bulge puts stress on the absorptive capacity of social services and the labor market as it increases vulnerability of civil conflict. The needs of youth cohorts, male and female, must be addressed in a comprehensive and holistic manner. Policies, systems, and programs must involve youth in community, regional and international development as leaders, while helping them to develop the skills, attitudes, and knowledge they need for successful transition to adulthood.

Youth are agents of change and cannot be viewed or treated as ongoing threats; youth will determine the future of the Mano River basin. They have demonstrated their willingness and ability to contribute to the development process, and must be given the

tools. Liberian youth had high participation rates in the presidential election, but they cited jobs as their number one need.⁴⁹ Unless this need is fulfilled, they will not be able to contribute to building a peaceful nation.

Transition to the employment market is a major challenge resulting in many youth being unemployed or underemployed with few prospects for economic security. Youth can be taught skills that will allow them to be the builders of needed infrastructure that will help Liberia become socially and economically productive. In the long-term, continued peace and stability will depend on increased economic opportunities to address public priorities.

In spite of understanding adolescent development and what ex-combatants need to become integrated into their society, USAID places a major focus on basic education which includes all efforts aimed at improving early childhood development, primary education, and secondary education (delivered in formal or informal settings), as well as training for teachers working at any of these levels. This includes literacy, numeracy and other basic skills for adults and out of school youth.⁵⁰ The definition of basic education does not include skill training for youth so that they can become productive members of the economy. Further, the definition does not emphasize intellectual learning, which stresses reasoning, hypothesizing, predicting, analyzing ideas, and the quest for understanding.

Youth in Liberia have high illiteracy rates, lack social skills, and have massive unemployment rates. The need for skill training rivals the need for basic literacy and numeracy. While it is important for youth to become literate and numerate, such should not be done at the exclusion of skills training. If youth do not have skills that allow them

to earn a living, they are more likely to be drawn back into conflicts so that their psychological, social and economic needs are met.

If development professionals know the needs of youth and the national security interest of the US, then programs must target youth. If it is in the security interest of the US to have ex-combatants engaged in society, pertinent programs should not be left to other donors. The USAID definition of basic education, then, needs to be expanded to include skills training or such training, should be available through other US-financed programs.

Skills training paves a road to development, especially as nations are emerging from civil strife. Skills training accelerates development as it allows people to build personal pride and have an interest in what they are able to produce. People gain economic power, and are able to reinvest in their country through everyday purchases. It facilitates public-private partnerships, as health clinics, schools, sanitation stations, and churches are able to be built throughout the country. Skills training reinforces the principles of democracy, as there is shared work, shared responsibilities, and shared decision-making. Accountability, transparency, and problem solving skills are also taught when people learn community development skills. Employment provides youth with an income source and a basis for self-respect and dignity. Skills training addresses what many ex-combatants missed as adolescents: support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, constructive use of time, commitment to a goal, and reinforcement of values, social acceptance, and positive identity.

With a combination of motivation, opportunities and ideas, youth can establish productive businesses. They can then shift from being job seekers to being job creators

and also from social dependence to self-sufficiency. Established entrepreneurs can mentor the youth, and provide internships and training opportunities. Providing youth with job skills can also address the challenge of urban migration. Job skill training must also include what is needed in rural communities, such as agricultural skills, infrastructure development, and provision of basic services.

USAID “has not focused systematically on youth as a critical component for long-term sustainable development.”⁵¹ The ad hoc approach has meant that youth considerations have been a part of various programs, but youth have not been the direct beneficiaries of many programs to prepare them to make the transition to adulthood. People do not skip stages in personal development as it is not a linear process, but all stages have to be experienced for the individual to be complete. The needs of ex-combatants must be addressed for national security, stability and development reasons.

Empowerment of youth is critical for lasting peace, reconstruction and development. When personal social and economic needs are met, people consider themselves integrated into the society and participation in civil strife becomes less attractive.

Conclusion

This paper set out to show that the US has security interests in Liberia, that Liberian stability is a national security objective, and that the US must address the needs of youth to help facilitate Liberian transformation into a more stable state and member of the Mano River Union. To promote a successful transformation of post-conflict Liberia, a primary focus of American assistance in the Liberian transformation

effort must be to integrate former youth civil war combatants into the formal economy in order to achieve strategic success in the Mano River basin.

Liberian ex-combatants suffered extensive psychological trauma and cultural alienation during a 14-year civil war. Developmentally, they were impressionistic, and the failed government and social structure did not provide what was needed to teach them how to become productive citizens. Youth of neighboring countries were also affected, and the regional dimension of the Liberian civil war must be considered when determining US national security interests.

Youth can be spoilers or they can be assets to development. Addressing what ex-combatants missed in their personal development helps us recognize what they need so that they can be the spark to stabilize their countries. The youth bulge can ultimately be harnessed as an engine of growth as youth become productive members of a democratic society.

If development does join diplomacy and defense as a key element of foreign policy, it must be used to integrate former Liberian civil war combatants into the formal economy. Knowing what youth experienced, they must be given the tools to become productive members of a democratic society. Youth should be a specific emphasis of the American assistance effort in order to achieve strategic success.

During the civil war, robbers “sang a terrifying serenade, ‘I Hear My Blessing Coming,’ in the moments before” they robbed their victims.⁵² Liberia has come a long way since then, with electricity beginning to illuminate streetlights, water available from communal taps, and street vendors providing prized items such as “cellphones, bluejeans, compact discs, cigarettes, fabric, leather shoes, handbags.”⁵³ May the new

serenade of diesel generators be a constant reminder that albeit slow, development is taking place. Confident that peace has come to stay, Liberians are “restoring the frayed fabric of their society.”⁵⁴

Liberia cannot solely bear the weight of maintaining peace in the Mano River basin. Given its historical ties to America, Liberia expects the US to help. Given the national interests of the US, help should be provided. It is imperative for the success of both Liberia’s government and US foreign policy that youth be a major variable in the development equation. When Liberians “hear the blessing coming” from the US, it must include programs that will assist the new government in accelerating development through the provision of assistance to address the long-term needs of vulnerable youth.

Endnotes

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